NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 529 NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 16, 1907. **Price, Five Cents**

THE INDEX OF SEVEN STARS

OR

NICK CARTER FINDS THE HIDDEN CITY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

They were inside a lofty cavern, the walls of which reflected back upon them the rays of the light as if from millions of gems.

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OR,

Nick Carter Finds the Hidden City.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS LETTER

"MR. NICHOLAS CARTER: When you receive this letter I will, perhaps, be dead, for I am living—if the life I lead may be called living—in momentary expectation of death.

"I cannot date my letter, because I have no idea of the month or the day of the month on which I write; neither have I an idea of the day of the week; I cannot 'head' the letter, for I have no idea in what part of the world I am. Respecting these two points I can only say that snow is falling gently beyond my window—that sort of snow which I should describe as probably the last of the season—and that I am imprisoned in a sort of tower of a huge, castlelike building, which is in a valley that is, in turn, surrounded by lofty mountains; and I have been a prisoner for so long a time that I do not remember when my captivity began. My last recollection of a date was June, 1900, and I know that some years must have elapsed since then—perhaps three or four, possibly as many as five.

"The last definite spot on earth which I recall was in the library of my own home in Madison Avenue, New York City, not very far from where you live.

"I must explain at once that I am in the power of a person, or of persons, concerning whom I know nothing; whose power over me is absolute, whose ways are mysterious beyond the power of my discernment, and who have rendered me not only incapable of resistance against them, but who have somehow stolen my memory from me, until now it is only at rare intervals that I recall facts concerning myself at all. I have forgotten my name—save that I was once called 'Jack' by some person whom I loved.

"This strange power that is exerted over me renders me entirely unconscious of the lapse of time, indifferent as to my surroundings, even happy, I suppose, in my maudlin insensibility to time, place, circumstance, or condition; but there are times when I suppose I am left to myself for too long an interval, and then a gleam of recollection breaks through the clouds in which I am enveloped, like sunshine through a lattice; at such times I remember. But it is all so vague, so uncertain, so hazy, so inchoate, that even at such times I am not sure of myself.

"I must make haste, for at any moment I may be interrupted and have to close this letter with abruptness; and so I beg of you now, while I have the time, to try to understand me as well as you can from what I am able to indict to you here. And I beseech you to search for me and to find me, if you can. It is a hard task, an unheard-of task, that I put to you, I know; but it is my prayer to you that you undertake it.

"I cannot even sign a name to this letter, for my name will not recur to me no matter how hard I try to recall it. These fiends by whom I am surrounded have stolen it from me—have deprived me of the memory of it.

"To-day I seem to have more memories crowding upon me than has been my fortune before since the first months of my imprisonment; to-day I have succeeded in recalling the fact that my home was once not far from yours; it even seems to me that I knew you personally—that there was an acquaintance between us—and, strangely enough, although I cannot recall the number of the house where I lived myself, I can remember your name and your address. But I am quite positive that I was once called 'Jack'; and so it may be that the name, or my handwriting, or the recollection to you of the disappearance of such a person about the time I have mentioned, may occur to you, and that you will know better than I do who I am.

"I beg of you that you will not regard the contents of this letter as the wanderings of a madman. I am sane enough—now; it is only that I am beset by a strange influence over which I have no control and against which I have no powers of resistance.

"I am surrounded by strange conditions, stranger people; and there is one among them who is sublime and also terrible; who is—— But I cannot describe her. The mere thought of her fills me with such strange trembling that the pencil almost drops from my hand. She is the despot, the ruler, the queen over all that is here. She is so beautiful that I catch my breath when she approaches, and she is so terrible that I shudder with horror even when I think of her; and there are three others who are like her in everything—so like that I scarcely know one from another—so like that I sometimes think there is only one, after all. And there is one man who seems equal to them in authority, although he is very old—very old, indeed; so old that one would suppose by looking at him that he might count his years by centuries.

"There are others here, also, but I never see them, save from my window and from the iron cage which surmounts the tower over my head, where I am permitted to take the sunshine. But I forget. There is a man—if he can be called a man—who acts in the capacity of my servant; but he is both deaf and dumb, deformed by a hump, armed like an ape.

"Sometimes, when the woman whom I have designated as the despot here—sometimes when she visits me I lapse into a state of semiconsciousness, during which I am aware of nothing at all save that I walk about, that the door of my prison-room remains open, that I wander among trees and flowers in the season of them, and that I am, therefore, somewhat at liberty.

"But it is a liberty of which I know nothing, of which I remember nothing at all after the interval has passed more than I have already stated; nor do I know the duration of these conditions. They may continue hours, or days, or weeks, or even months. I have no idea as to that.

"I do not know if this letter will ever reach you, or, if it should go at all, what distance it may have to travel to get to you, or how much time may pass before you read it. I know nothing more than I have stated; but in what manner I shall attempt to send it on its way I do know, and that I will tell to you.

"I have mentioned an iron cage which surmounts the tower where I have my room.

"The tower is large—twelve paces in diameter across the top—and round. There are windows on every side of my room, so that I have from it a magnificent view of the country around me, of the towering mountains.

"And over me, reached by a spiral stairway, is the caged platform of the tower; and there within my cage my captors have put soil and shrubbery and flowers, and from that place with the refuse from my meals it has long been my habit to feed the birds which now come in great numbers, and some of them will even feed from my hands through the bars—and it is to one of those birds that I intend to fasten this letter, in the hope that God will permit it ultimately to find its way to you.

"I was startled right here, Mr. Carter, believing that I was to be interrupted in my writing. I have been left so long to myself now—weeks—that at any moment I expect interruption. I have mounted to the cage in the tower to complete this letter; and coming here has brought another thing to mind that I had forgotten. It is this:

"At the far extremity of this building, two hundred feet or more away from me, there is another tower like this one, surmounted by a cage like this one, and inhabied, like this, by one who is a prisoner, I suppose, like myself; *and that other is a woman.*

"That is all that I know about that other, who, perhaps, suffers like myself. Just now she is waving her hand at me, and I have waved back, and will do so again. It is the first time that this has ever occurred. Perhaps she guesses what I am doing, seeing me engaged in writing; so, without knowing in the least who she is, save that she is white, and young, and—I think—beautiful, I plead for her, as well as for myself.

"I told you at the beginning that I am in momentary expectation of death. I have no good reason for that statement, save that the conduct of those around me seems to indicate that I am being prepared for some great sacrifice. It has always been so since I have been here.

"Each time when the beautiful despot visits me, when I look into her eyes, I expect death. I wish I could describe her to you; but, save that her beauty is so marvelous that it is terrible, that her eyes are like stars—sometimes soft, sometimes blazing—that they are very dark, and limpid, and luminous, that her teeth are white and even and perfect, that her smile is always like sunshine—only sometimes it is the frosty sunshine of zero weather—that her hair has a blaze of gold even in its blackness, and that her complexion is like tinted ivory, and her figure and bearing comprise the perfection——"

The letter broke off abruptly here, but beneath it was a scrawl which read:

"My bird came for the letter, as if God had sent it to me. I dare not wait. Find me—for God's sake, find me!"

Nick Carter raised his eyes from the pages, gazed intently for a moment at the man who was seated opposite him at the table—they were in the library of the detective's house—and then, without a word, read the missive from beginning to end a second time.

Just half an hour ago Joseph had sought Nick, in his study, and had said to him:

"There is a man below, sir, who insists upon seeing you in person, although I have told him that you are busy and not to be interrupted. He said he would wait until you were at liberty. I told him that you might not be at liberty to see him before night, and he said in that case he would wait till night. Under the circumstances, I thought it best to tell you about him."

"What does he want?" asked Nick.

"He will not say."

"Who is he?"

"He said his name would make no difference to you, as you had never heard of him or it."

"What does he look like?"

"A sailor—a sea-captain."

"Show him into the library. I will go down to him presently."

And when the detective descended the stairs to the library somewhat later the man—a Norwegian, from his appearance—rose and handed him a small packet that was tightly rolled within a substance that looked like oiled silk, and upon which was plainly written, in red, Nick Carter's name and address.

"What is it?" asked Nick, taking it in his hand.

"I don't know. It is for you, is it not?"

"Apparently. Where did you get it? Who sent it to me?"

"Perhaps if you read it both questions may be answered, sir. Truth to tell, I know as little about it as you do yourself."

"And yet you bring it to me. Who are you?"

"Read what it contains, if it is a message, Mr. Carter. After that I will answer any and all questions you may wish to ask."

And so, while the man resumed his seat beside the table, Nick slitted the covering of the packet, taking care to destroy nothing of the address upon it, and from the inside of it he unrolled a long strip of the same substance as the wrapper, corn-colored and two and a half inches in width by two feet in length, and surprisingly thin and light, as well as tough—and what the contents were we already know.

And now, after the second perusal of the letter, he raised his eyes a second time toward the strong, handsome face and tawny head of the big Norwegian, who spoke English so scholarly, and again studied it for a moment in silence, noticing that the clear blue eyes of the stranger met his own gaze with an expression of perfect frankness.

"It is a strange missive," said Nick. "Do you know anything of its contents?"

"No," was the laconic reply.

"Read it," said Nick; and he passed the roll to the stranger.

CHAPTER II.

A MAN OF MYSTERY.

"It *is* a strange letter, indeed," was the remark of the stranger, as he returned the roll to the detective when, like him, he had read the contents twice through.

"Will you tell me now who you are?" asked Nick. "You will admit that I am somewhat curious, with good reason."

"I am Lief Larsen, a Norwegian. By profession, a sailor; by choice, an explorer; by reputation, an adventurer; by inheritance, something of a dare-devil; by descent, of noble lineage; by fate, a wanderer; by chance, a man of wealth, and by good fortune a person of education. Are you answered?"

"It would seem that you have given me rather a comprehensive answer to my question," replied the detective, laughing. "How came you by this roll of manuscript?"

"I found it."

"Where?"

"At sea. A bird—a strange bird to me—sought the deck of my vessel for rest. It was so exhausted by its long flight that I caught it easily. Under its wing was that roll."

"And you have taken the trouble to bring it to me!" said Nick, in surprise.

"It was addressed to you. The writing was plain enough. I am a wanderer. It was as well that I should sail in this direction as in any other. The bird, directed by the Almighty, selected me as its messenger. I accepted the responsibility. That is all."

"Where were you when the bird alighted upon your deck?"

"Latitude thirty-five degrees, three minutes, ten seconds south; longitude forty degrees, ten minutes, ten seconds west. In other words, directly off the mouth of the Rio de la Platte, and twenty-six hours out from Buenos Ayres, going slowly."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Nick. "And you have come all that distance to deliver this letter to me!"

"Why not? I have told you that I had nothing else to do."

"A third of the distance around the globe, from south to north."

"About that—yes."

"How long a time have you been in making the trip?"

"I received the letter on the tenth of November—springtime down there. This is the tenth of January. I have been two months on the way."

The detective mused for a moment in silence; then he said:

"The letter refers to the last snowfall of the season. That would indicate that you received it in your hands not very long after it was written, would it not?"

"Yes—or a year later."

"Always supposing that the letter is authentic, and not a hoax of some kind."

"I believe that it is authentic," said the Norwegian quietly, but with settled conviction in his manner. "When we have discussed the matter somewhat more I will tell you why I am of that opinion."

"Tell me now. But wait. In my astonishment about the letter and the manner of its reception I have forgotten to be courteous. Lay aside your coat and come with me to my study."

The stranger left his chair, and, instead of laying aside his coat as he had been requested to do, he buttoned it tightly around him.

"I should like to accept your hospitality, Mr. Carter," he said, smiling and showing his white, strong teeth, "but the fact is that at the present moment my time happens to be valuable, although as a rule it is worth nothing at all. Possibly, however, you may be induced to accept mine—later in the day, or this evening."

"How so?" asked Nick, rising also. "Do you mean that we must part without discussing this matter further?"

"For the present—yes. My yacht is at anchor in the Hudson River, off One Hundred and Fiftieth Street, however. Will you be my guest at dinner on board this evening?"

"Yes," replied Nick, after a moment of hesitation, "if that is the only way."

"I could come to you to-morrow, Mr. Carter. I will come to you to-morrow, in any case, if you request it; but I should like to have you for my guest this evening on board the yacht."

"Very well. What time shall I go?"

"I will expect you soon after four this afternoon."

"I will be there. Off One Hundred and Fiftieth Street, you say?"

"Yes. The launch will be at the pier awaiting you at four. I regret that my engagements prevent me from remaining with you now. At four, then."

Nick went with the Norwegian to the door, and there he renewed his promise to be at the foot of West One Hundred and Fiftieth Street at four that afternoon, and then he returned to his study, with the mysterious letter in his hand.

And there he read it over and over again.

"A mysterious document, truly—a hoax, most likely," was his final comment, as he laid it aside when luncheon was announced.

Chick and Patsy were both out of the city. Ten-Ichi was at home, and after luncheon the detective asked the Japanese to go with him to the study.

He had said nothing at all about the strange letter, or in reference to his caller, to the assistant; and now, when they were in the study together, Nick placed the document in Ten-Ichi's hand.

"Read it, Ten-Ichi," he said, smiling. "Read it through to the end, without comment, and after that tell me what you think about it."

Ten-Ichi did as the others had done before him. He read the remarkable letter twice, from beginning to end, before he made any comment whatever; and then he slowly rolled it together again, still without speaking.

"Well?" asked the detective.

"Where did it come from?" asked Ten-Ichi non-committally.

Nick told him.

"Do you think that the Norwegian told the truth?" was the next question.

"There seems to be no reason, at least not upon the surface of the thing, to suggest the contrary," replied the detective.

"What was your impression of the man himself?"

"I hardly know, Ten-Ichi. He gave me many and rather varied impressions. For one thing, I think he is the handsomest man I ever looked upon. He is a giant in stature, without looking so big as he really is. He must possess phenomenal strength. He is like a god of Norwegian mythology."

"Humph!" said Ten-Ichi. "Did you size him up as being honest?"

"Yes; in his purposes."

"Your reply seems to qualify my question."

"I mean that he is the sort of man who would create his own criterions. He would be honest with himself, no matter what others might think. He interested me."

"So I observe. What I meant by my question was this: Do you think he was honest about this letter?"

"Yes; I think he was."

"You believe that it came to him in the manner he says it did?"

"Yes. I see no reason why I should not believe it."

"Has it occurred to you, chief, that the whole affair may be a 'plant'?"

"That, Ten-Ichi, was the very first thought about it that did occur to me."

"Do you mean that you have dismissed it since then?"

"Dismissed it—yes. Forgotten the idea—no."

"Which means that you will not permit yourself to be hoodwinked."

"It means that I shall proceed with caution, of course."

Ten-Ichi read the letter to the end a third time. Then he asked:

"Have you stopped to think if you knew such a person as it mentioned here? A 'Jack,' who disappeared somewhere about the year 1900—June, he says? Somebody who lived near you, and whom you knew well enough so that he should make the statement about it that is here?"

"I have not been able to recall such a circumstance—yet."

"Will you tell me what more, if anything, the Norwegian had to say about the affair?"

"He said practically nothing, save that he believed the letter to be genuine, and that he would tell me why when he had more time."

"Why didn't he tell you at once?"

"Because it was not his whim to do so, I suppose. He is evidently a gentleman of whims. The fact that he brought the letter here from the other end of the world would indicate that much."

"Unless it indicated something else, chief."

"What else, Ten-Ichi?"

"That the whole thing is some devilish scheme against yourself, for instance."

"Oh, I do not believe that at all. I really believe that the man was frank enough in what he had to tell me. I really believe that the letter came to him in the manner he says it did. I really believe that he was in earnest in all that he said about it, which was but little, it is true."

"Is he coming again?"

"Perhaps, later. To-night—this afternoon—I am going to him."

"Where?"

"Aboard his yacht, Off One Hundred and Fiftieth Street. At four o'clock."

"Shall you take me with you?"

"Perhaps so. I have not thought of that point. Yes, I think I will do that."

"I would like to be present, if you are willing."

"You shall go with me."

"We will leave here in about an hour, then?"

"Yes."

Ten-Ichi read the letter a fourth time. Then he looked up, with a smile.

"Chief," he said, "do you remember Dazaar?"

"Rather!"

"Isn't there something suggestive of Dazaar about this letter?"

"Yes. Not of Dazaar exactly, but it contains the same elements of mystery."

"I think there is another view that we should take of this matter, chief."

"What is that?"

"You have a great many enemies. Here is a mysterious letter. You are fond of mysteries. Your enemies are aware of that fact about you. Here is a mysterious personage who brings the letter to you. He invites you to go aboard of his yacht in the river to dine with him. The yacht is anchored in the stream, not tied to a wharf. Probably the cable can be slipped easily."

"Well?"

"If some of those enemies wished to get you into their power this would be a first-class method of accomplishing it; no?"

"Yes."

"I think that it is a point worth considering."

"I don't at all. There is nothing of the villain about the man who calls himself Lief Larsen. He is not a crook. He is not a criminal. I am sufficiently a reader of men to be positive in making that statement. Neither is he a man who would consort with crooks or criminals. Neither is he a man who would do their dirty work for them. He is a brave man, a fearless man, if I am any reader of character. He is not underhanded—not a natural deceiver—not a scoundrel."

"Anyhow," said Ten-Ichi, "for the present he is a mystery."

"Yes," replied Nick. "I will admit that. He is a mystery."

"And for the present, at least, we will have to let it go at that."

CHAPTER III.

THE COMMANDER OF THE "VIKING."

"It is too bad that Chick is not at home," said Ten-Ichi, after a pause.

"Yes," said Nick. "I wish he were here."

"But you have another assistant beside myself who is within reach." Ten-Ichi turned his head away as he made the remark, so that his chief could not look into his eyes.

"Eh?" said the detective. Then he laughed. "I suppose," he continued, "that you refer to Clarice." He laughed again, softly this time; and then: "Clarice hardly comes under the head of an assistant—as yet—Ten-Ichi."

"Seriously, chief, I wish you would take that letter to her before we go to the yacht this afternoon. I wish you would show it to her; let her read it through two or three times, as we have done. Her intuition is a very valuable asset, in my opinion, and this is a matter where intuition seems to be the only available quantity."

Nick left his chair and rang for Joseph. To Ten-Ichi he said:

"Meet me at the foot of One Hundred and Fiftieth Street at four."

A few minutes later he was shown into the parlor of the house where Clarice lived, and without preamble or explanation he placed the mysterious letter in her hands.

"Clarice," he said, "I wish you would read what that contains very carefully, and then tell me exactly the impression you receive from it. Will you?"

"Yes," she replied brightly.

He crossed over to a window and stood there looking out upon the snow in the street until she called to him; then he returned and dropped into a chair, facing her.

"Well?" he asked.

"Where did it come from?" she inquired, in return; and he smiled.

"That seems always to be the first question about the letter," he said. "I wish you would tell me your impressions about it without asking any questions. Afterward I will tell you all that is known about it."

"I suppose you have thought that it might be a hoax?" she said.

"Don't ask questions; tell me your impressions—your intuitions," he insisted.

"My impression," she replied slowly, "is that somewhere in the world there is a man who is held a prisoner in a castle, or something of the kind, against his will; that the castle is a lunatic asylum; that the wing in which his cell is located looks out upon another part of the building where the female patients are—— "

"Oh, stop!" said Nick, interrupting her. "If the Norwegian told the truth about it that cannot be the idea at all."

"Who is the Norwegian? Remember that you have told me nothing. I don't get impressions, as you call them, without something to go upon. The letter reads like the wanderings of a madman, and yet there are qualities about it which suggest that it is not. If you will tell me all you know about it I may perhaps, discover that I have some intuitive perceptions concerning it."

And so the detective told her all about the letter; related all that he knew and guessed about the Norwegian, and at the conclusion she said:

"I would like to see that man, Nick."

"I cannot very well spring a dinner-party upon him when he has invited only me to be present," was the reply. "Already I have decided to take Ten-Ichi; but——"

"Oh, I did not mean that you were to take me there; but cannot you bring him here?"

"Perhaps—to-morrow."

"Do that, if you can."

"Very well. And now for those impressions, Clarice?"

"I think, somehow, that the letter is authentic. The parchment—or whatever substance it is upon which the message is written—is not like anything that I ever saw before. The letter was delivered aboard the Norwegian's yacht—if what he says is true—off the coast of South America. There is a great deal of undiscovered country, is there not, in that part of the world?"

"Yes."

"Among the Cordilleras, particularly."

"What of that, Clarice?"

"Nothing of it at all, save that where there are undiscovered countries there are also mysteries. Where there are mysteries there might also be mysterious prisoners. Where there are mysterious prisoners there may be unheard-of customs. I think, really, that I am just as seriously without impressions about it as you are yourself."

Nick nodded his head in acquiescence.

"But," she continued, "you are not without your own impressions about the affair. You have some ideas of your own about it, only you have not mentioned them. Suppose you tell me what they are?"

"No," he replied. "I don't think I have any definite idea at all. To tell you the truth, I am very much more interested in the man who brought the letter to me than I am in the letter itself."

"I thought so. So am I," she said sagely.

"He had—he has a strange effect upon me, Clarice."

"What sort of effect?"

"I hardly know. He is a man of mystery. He is the sort of man who is not only a stranger to me, but is

also a stranger to all mankind. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Scarcely."

"He is a sort of human unit. A man by himself. Wonderfully strong—I don't mean in muscular power, but in ideals, in spirit, in character."

"I understand."

"If I have an impression about the whole affair, it is that more than the mere address upon that roll of parchment brought him to my house."

"Ah! Now you are getting at it."

"I don't know whether we are or not."

"What sort of an idea could have brought him to you if it were not the address alone? Do you mean that you think he knew the contents of that letter all the time?"

"I find myself wondering if he did."

"And believing that he did?"

"I cannot say that. He could not have known the contents of the letter unless he wrote it himself, or it was written at his dictation, or with his knowledge and approval; and for some reason I do not think any of those things."

"Aren't you somewhat paradoxical in your statements?" she asked, smiling.

"I suppose I am. What I mean to imply is that the letter, its methods of reaching him, and finally its contents, is somehow associated with something that the man knew about before it came to him, and that he happened to be cruising in those waters at the time because of the previous knowledge he possessed. The letter and the manner of its receipt by him is somehow cumulative evidence of something else."

"Let us look at the matter from another side," she said to him.

"Well?"

"Whatever the letter is, good or bad, real or imaginary, authentic or a hoax, you can do nothing whatever about it, can you?"

"No; I suppose not."

"You would not start off for latitude something and longitude something else—for a spot in mid-ocean—on the strength of that letter, would you?"

"Certainly not."

"If it told you of a definite locality, say of a thousand square miles, where the search for the writer might be undertaken, it would be different; but as it tells you nothing, and as the only idea of a definite locality is in mid-ocean, what is to be done about it?"

"Nothing."

"Then, thrusting aside all suppositions about it, will you tell me just what there is in the matter that interests you?"

"Lief Larsen."

"Only him?"

"At present—yes."

"Then, as a matter of fact, you did not come here to get my impressions about that letter at all, did you?"

"I expect," said the detective, pretending to be very humble, "that I only made it an excuse to come here to see you."

"Which reminds me," she replied, rising, "that if you are to meet Ten-Ichi at four o'clock at One Hundred and Fiftieth Street, as you said, you had best be on your way; but don't forget," she added, as he was leaving her, "that you are to bring the Norwegian here to see me to-morrow. It will be Sunday; you may bring him to dinner, if you will—at three o'clock."

It was a few minutes after four when Nick arrived at the appointed place, and he found the launch awaiting him at the wharf. But there was no sign of Ten-Ichi.

One of the men—he who was evidently in charge of the launch—came forward and touched his hat respectfully to Nick as he approached, and inquired, in perfect English, if he was Mr. Carter.

"I am," replied Nick; "but I was expecting a gentleman to meet me here. You have not seen him, I suppose?"

"I have seen no gentleman awaiting you, sir," was the reply. "Captain Larsen is expecting you aboard the yacht."

Nick looked at his watch. It was already a quarter past the hour, and so, with a shrug of his shoulders, he said to the man:

"Very well. You may take me to the yacht at once. It seems that I am somewhat late myself. Then, if your captain is willing, you may return here for my assistant."

The man bowed and Nick entered the launch. A few minutes later he ascended to the deck of as trim and beautiful a vessel as he had ever seen.

Larsen met him at the gangway and extended a cordial hand.

"I am very glad to see you again," he said, smiling. "Will you come to my cabin?"

"One moment, please," replied Nick. "I took the liberty of asking one of my assistants to accompany me here to-day. I found, upon my arrival at the wharf, that he had not yet put in an appearance. Would you permit your launch to return and wait a little while for him?"

"Certainly. By all means."

Larsen gave the man of the launch the necessary order, after which he led the way to the cabin.

If the exterior of the yacht was pleasant, Nick found that the interior was sumptuously elegant in its appointments. Everything was in exquisite taste, and likewise on every hand was evidence that the owner of the vessel possessed unlimited wealth, which he had not hesitated to use in fitting out his craft.

"Welcome to the *Viking*, Mr. Carter," said Larsen, waving the detective to a chair. "Make yourself perfectly at home. Is she not a beautiful vessel?"

"She is, indeed, Captain Larsen."

"I am justly proud of my sea home, for that is what the *Viking* is. She never goes out of commission. I live with her, in perpetual summer, or in perpetual winter, as I happen to like best. I wish that you might make a voyage in her with me. I might say that I wish that this mysterious letter to you would bring about such an event."

"I hardly think that such an outcome of the letter is likely," replied Nick; "but I will be free to admit that if it were quite possible I should not be opposed to making a trip with you."

"Could you not make it—er—quite possible, Mr. Carter?"

"No. Not at present, at least."

"Then suppose you delegated me to do it for you? Eh?"

"I don't think I understand you."

"Suppose that I should make it possible—for you?"

CHAPTER IV.

A PRISONER ON THE "VIKING."

The captain of the *Viking* gave Nick no opportunity to reply to the last remark, for he broke into a laugh; and Nick, watching him, decided that this was in many respects the most remarkable personage he had ever met.

He was so big, so masterful, so strong, so self-reliant, so defiant of the world and all things within the world.

And while they talked together before dinner was announced he displayed an abundance of knowledge quite as remarkable as the man himself. He seemed to be utterly at home upon any subject and equally versed in all. He knew every corner of the world equally well. Alaska was as familiar to him as Norway; Borneo, China, even Thibet, were trodden paths in his experiences, and he was even a greater linguist than Nick Carter himself.

As a companion he was fascinating, for he talked of his travels with a ready tongue, and with a knowledge of the lands and the people he had visited and known which was surprising.

At half-past five o'clock, when the detective looked at his watch, his host laughed and remarked casually:

"It appears that something has happened to detain your friend, Mr. Carter."

"So it would seem," replied Nick, greatly perplexed. "I hope that you will not delay your dinner on his account?"

"Not at all. It is ordered for six o'clock. If your friend has not arrived by that time we will conclude that he is not coming; no?"

"By all means. I have already arrived at that decision, captain."

And at six—just as the yacht's bell struck four bells—the two seated themselves opposite each other at the table.

The repast was half-finished, and as yet the subject which interested Nick most had not been touched upon, and he was just on the point of mentioning it when he became suddenly conscious that the yacht was in motion.

With an exclamation of astonishment, he started to his feet.

"What is the matter, Mr. Carter?" asked the Norwegian, smiling blandly upon him across the board.

Nick stepped around his chair until he stood behind it, facing Larsen, and then very calmly, but also sternly, he demanded:

"What does this mean, sir? The yacht is in motion. We are no longer at anchor. What is the character of the game you are endeavoring to play with me?"

"Have you forgotten so soon what was said shortly after you entered this cabin?" replied the Norwegian. "I told you that I would like it if you could take a voyage with me; you replied that you would like it also if such a thing were possible. I said why not make it possible, and you——"

"Enough, sir!"

The Norwegian shrugged his shoulders and stopped; but he leaned back in his chair, with a smile still upon his handsome face, and he thrust his hands deep into his pockets, looking more like a handsome, mythological god than like a man.

For a moment Nick gazed sternly upon him; then, with a return shrug of the shoulders, he wheeled in his tracks and strode to the cabin door.

For some reason he realized before he touched it that he would find it locked against him, and therefore he was not surprised when it refused to yield at his touch, and he turned where he stood, four steps above the floor of the cabin, and quietly pulled a revolver from his pocket.

"I will thank you, Captain Larsen, if that is your name, to open this door!" he said coldly.

Larsen did not move. He did not change his attitude or the expression of his face.

"I shall not open it—yet; nor for some time to come," he replied as calmly as if he were referring to some trivial circumstance.

Nick raised the revolver until the muzzle was on a level with the Norwegian's heart, but still the latter did not move; nor did he manifest the slightest concern about the weapon. Indeed, his manner was such that Nick found himself wondering if, by any chance, the man had found an opportunity to remove the loads from the cylinders. But on second thought he knew better than that.

"What the devil do you mean, anyhow?" demanded the detective, totally at a loss to understand the situation.

"Sit down, Mr. Carter. Don't be angry. There is no need for it—oh, certainly, there is only very little need. As for your weapon, it is loaded, I suppose?"

"It certainly is."

"And I have no doubt that you could drive a nail with it at thirty paces. Indeed, I have been told as much."

"You have been correctly informed—as you will presently have the proof of it unless you open that door!"

"I repeat, I will not open it—yet."

"Then I shall do one of two things, Captain Larsen."

"Yes?"

"I am in two minds—whether to shoot you, or not to shoot you—"

Larsen laughed aloud, interrupting him.

"You will not shoot," he said. "I do not fear your weapon."

For reply Nick pulled the trigger of the weapon, purposely sending the ball so close to the Norwegian's temple that it cut away a lock of his tawny hair and then buried itself in the mahogany bulkhead.

But Larsen did not move even then. He only smiled the more, if anything. Nick could not see that he winked an eye or "turned a hair," as the saying goes.

"That, I suppose," he said coolly, "was intended merely as an exhibition of your skill? I know that you will not kill me, Mr. Carter; neither will you shoot away an ear, as you are now thinking of doing. You cannot break down the door, because it is made of steel; the entire vessel, from stem to stern, is composed of steel. There is absolutely no means by which you can get out of this cabin until I choose to let you out, Mr. Carter—and I shall not choose to do so until it is my very good pleasure. Be seated and finish your dinner; or were you quite through?"

"Quite," replied Nick, and he smiled grimly, for, after all, the situation was not without its quality of humor.

"That is better," said Larsen, quickly taking note of the smile. "Take it easy, Mr. Carter. Please do. There is no occasion for excitement."

"I never get excited," said Nick.

"So I perceive. Let me put the statement in another form. There is no occasion for anxiety. You don't object to taking a little trip with me, do you?"

"I would not have done so—under proper conditions, sir. Now, I am afraid, it is somewhat different."

"Nonsense! You will get over that idea. Let me put the present circumstance to you very plainly."

"I wish you would."

"The *Viking* has started. It is my pleasure that you should be a passenger aboard of her. I feared that if I asked the favor of you in the usual way you might object—that you might, in fact, refuse. To obviate that possibility, I arranged matters in this way: On the deck my men have their orders. They know exactly how to proceed. They will proceed in that manner, and nothing can stop them or turn them aside. My orders are always obeyed literally. It is a fad of mine to have it so. Are you attentive?"

"Quite so."

"Won't you put aside that weapon and sit down?"

"Not yet. Go on."

"I had this vessel constructed, at great expense, for a definite purpose. She is not like any other craft you ever saw or heard of. Some day I will explain all her peculiarities to you, but for the present let it suffice that if at this moment I were bound hand and foot, if I were unconscious, if I were dead, the exits from the cabin would still be closed against you, and you would not escape from it unless you found a means to batter down the steel bulkheads by which it is enclosed. I do not tell you that in order to affect your present desire to use that pistol; I merely make a statement of fact. Will you sit down."

"Not yet. Go on."

"We had been under weigh a long time before you were aware of the fact. There is no vibration here. This is a turbine engine. It was the motion of the water of the lower bay that apprised you of the fact that we were moving, not the motion of the engines. We are now—or should be—rapidly approaching Sandy Hook. When we have passed out of sight of land I will open the cabin doors and the vessel will be as free to you as to myself. You are not a prisoner, but a passenger—and my honored guest, Mr. Carter."

There was something so pleasantly impudent about the manner and the words of the man that the detective could scarcely repress a smile, and he suddenly resolved to make the best of the situation, at least for the present, and so he asked abruptly:

"Did you write that letter yourself—that letter that you brought to me?"

"Certainly not. Have you thought that?"

"I might think almost anything, and be excused for doing so, under the present circumstances," said Nick. "Where did you get the letter? Who did write it?"

"I pray you, Mr. Carter, one question at a time. I received the letter precisely in the manner I described to you, and I have no more idea than you have who wrote it."

"Are those statements true? Swear to them."

"I have nothing by which I can swear if you will not take my word. I have nothing that I hold more sacred than my word. I give you that. The statements are literally true. Will you resume your chair now?"

"One moment. Whither are we bound? What orders have you given to your men?"

"My navigator has sealed orders to his instructions. He is

to put to sea, and read his orders at noon to-morrow. As for 'Whither are we bound?' that is a question that has not been determined. It is a question which I hope to [illegible]."

"Oh! Indeed!"

"Mr. Carter, will you answer a few questions for me candidly?"

"I don't know whether I will or not, Larsen. At the present moment, I am more disposed toward cheating you candidly."

Larsen laughed aloud.

"I don't know that I blame you," he said. "But it is because you are not used to having another decide for you what you are to do; eh?"

"Possibly that has something to do with it. I do not like the idea of being taken upon a pleasure trip without being first consulted."

"Exactly. And now for the questions."

"You may ask them. I will answer them if I see fit, or care to do so."

"Have you any pressing business—business of importance to yourself, I mean—that should detain you in the city at the present time? Because, if you have, I will put you frankly that in that case I will take you at once back to New York, upon receiving your promise that you will return to me as soon as that business is attended to. Have you such business?"

"No."

"Is it possible that you could make definite arrangements by telegraphing from another port to your home, so that you could be absent from New York for—say for a while?"

"If the circumstances were such as to meet with my approval—yes."

"Is there any one at your home in New York, or in the city of New York who will be made anxious by your non-return from it?"

"Yes."

"Excuse this question, please, before I ask it. Is it, by any chance, the lady upon whom you called this afternoon before you came to the yacht to keep your appointment with me?"

CHAPTER V.

A COMPACT OF THREE.

Nick could have struck the man in the face for his insolence; and yet he could see little nothing with advantage to his own [illegible]; and instantly he answered in that cool, [illegible] which [illegible] when nothing else will make [illegible].

"Larsen, if that is your way of [illegible] I am sorry for you. You seem to be [illegible] with a wonderful conceit; and would have to [illegible] you could say so [illegible] which would assure her that the message came from you. If you will write such a message, I will have it sent at once."

"Who would receive the message and forward it to her?" asked Nick, aghast at the cool audacity of the man.

The Norwegian smiled.

"It will be received and it will be forwarded to her," he replied calmly. "And more, if you desire it, we will lie to long enough for you to receive a reply; and you can ask for information from her which only she can give, in order that you may be assured that the reply comes from her."

"Very good," said Nick, suddenly determined. "Open your cabin doors; at least, unlock them. I do not like the feeling that I am in any sense a prisoner. If I remain here, it must be of my own free will and accord: nor will I make any promises not to attempt to leave you."

"You have already promised by implication," said the Norwegian, laughing. "Between two men, each of whom realize the possibility within the other, that is sufficient. It is as good as a definite promise."

He leaned forward in his chair and reached with one hand under the table; then, as he resumed his former position, he said:

"Come. Write your message. We will then go upon the deck and ascertain what our present position may be."

Nick wheeled upon his heel and approached the door. It opened to his touch and he went out upon the deck; nor did the Norwegian attempt to follow. He seemed to understand that the detective desired to be alone for the moment, and also to have no fear that Nick would make any effort at escape.

Indeed, if you stop to think of it, how could he?

The *Viking* was gliding through the water at a rate of speed which must have covered as much as twenty knots an hour; the shore of Coney Island was abaft of them over the port-quarter; Sandy Hook was just off the starboard bow and the yacht was about midway between the two; the month was January, and here and there blocks of ice could be seen floating in the water.

Nick remained only a moment on deck; then he returned to the cabin, and, seizing pen and paper, indicted the message to Clarice. It said:

"I shall be absent from New York for an indefinite period. Dinner engagement for to-morrow impossible. Will write you fully within a week. Repeat substance of my last remark to you, in your reply. NICK."

Two hours later, while Sandy Hook [illegible] from the yacht's [illegible], it was:

"I suspect that you made the Norwegian an enemy to come to see me. Beware of that man. Please keep me informed as often as possible. CLARICE."

The reply that Nick finally received is given on the

point so that it will not be necessary to refer to it again, but there was much that happened aboard the yacht before it came; for, when Nick had written his message and Captain Larsen had given it to his steward to send, he turned to the detective and said to him:

"And now, Mr. Carter, I have a surprise for you which I trust will be a pleasant one."

"Yes?" replied Nick, without showing much interest. "You seem to be a gentleman who is full of surprises. What may this next one be?"

"Your guest, whom you expected to meet you at the yacht when you came to dine with me—your Japanese assistant, Ten-Ichi—is here," was the cool reply. "He arrived before you did. I had him conveyed to the yacht, and I have taken good care of him, thinking that you might desire his companionship on the trip. I might add that he has had his dinner."

Nick's first impulse was to be angry again; his next one was to laugh. The cool, deliberate, studied audacity of the man surpassed anything in his experience; and yet with it all the detective could not help liking him.

There was something to admire in his effrontery; something to respect in his utter frankness. His boldness was original in its methods; and with it all the detective believed that he had found a man who was very much after his own heart, a man who was different from his fellows, who would stop at nothing to achieve his ends, but who nevertheless was honorable in his dealings, and, above all, was a gentleman.

"Where is he?" asked Nick, without evincing the surprise he felt.

"I will send for him in a moment; but, before I do so, I have one more thing to say to you, Mr. Carter."

"Well? At least you will not surprise me. I have quite passed the point of being surprised at anything you say or do. What now?"

"I am a student of character, Mr. Carter. I have known more or less about you for several years, and more than once I have been on the point of seeking you out; but I never saw you until to-day when I called at your house."

Nick nodded, and the Norwegian continued:

"I studied you with close attention while I had the opportunity to do so to-day. I arrived at the decision that you were a man—shall I say like myself in many respects?—at least, that you are the sort of man for whom I feel respect and admiration."

Nick bowed somewhat ironically.

"I realized that if I told you at once what I had in mind to say to you when I made the call, that you would regard all the things I had to tell you as chimerical, and that I should lose the opportunity I coveted—your companionship and assistance on an undertaking of which this voyage we have now started upon is the beginning."

Again Nick smiled and inclined his head; but he did not interrupt.

"Then it was that this scheme—this trick that I have played upon you—occurred to me. I believe—and I still believe—that the very audacity of it would appeal to you as nothing else would do; no harm could result from it, and, in a word, I resolved to put it into execution.

"And now, Mr. Carter, I come to the confessional part of it all. I beg of you, if it is possible, to go with me on this voyage to South America. I will not offer you money, save to say that I am richer than the richest man in the world, and, if you would accept all that I have now, I could within a year secure as much more for myself again. But what I wish to say is this: *If you say that you cannot go with me, I will at once give orders for the yacht to be turned back to New York, and you shall take breakfast in your own home in the morning.* But I sincerely hope that you will not ask me to do that."

For a moment the detective was silent; but then, coldly, he said:

"I think, Captain Larsen, that I will take you at your word. I will ask you to take me back to New York."

The Norwegian started. He bit his lip. He frowned, and for a moment his eyes blazed with an expression that was not anger, but yet was very much like it; and then he shrugged his mighty shoulders, laughed cynically, rose from his chair, and, with the cool remark, "So be it," left the cabin.

Nick followed him to the deck. He stood near the companionway while the Norwegian called to the officer of the deck and gave the necessary order. He waited there until the graceful vessel swung around and was again headed toward Manhattan, and then he returned to the cabin, perceiving after a moment that Larsen had followed him down.

The tawny-headed giant was himself again, for he smiled as he extended his hand to the detective, although there was an expression of pain and undoubted disappointment around his eyes which he strove manfully to conceal.

"It is done," he said simply. "I am sorry that it had to be done. In three hours you will be back again in New York, for I have given orders for full speed, and the *Viking* is very fast. And now let us shake hands in friendship, Mr. Carter."

Nick stepped forward quickly and placed his hand in the Norwegian's; and for a moment these two men, so different in stature and in all outward appearance, but so alike in heart, and character, and motive, looked frankly into each other's eyes; and both smiled.

"I did not think that I needed a test, Larsen," said the detective; then, very quietly, "but, although I realized that you meant what you said to me, I read enough of your purpose in your manner to know that it would be

a struggle to carry out your promise. I thought, therefore, that I would put you to the test. You may bring the *Viking* about again, if you choose. I will go with you, Larsen."

"I will go with you. We can put in at Newport News, where I can write some letters and do some telegraphing and telephoning. After that, I will go with you."

Larsen did not wait to hear another word. He started for the deck again as if he feared that Nick might change his mind once more, if he delayed; but after a moment he was back again, and he was laughing joyously with his big voice, and there was a glow of happiness in his face and eyes that was unmistakable.

"God bless you, Carter!" he cried. "You will not regret the decision. That I promise you. There are adventures ahead of you such as you never dreamed of, for I know a great deal about that letter which has not yet been told, although I did not read it, and had no idea of its contents until you showed it to me after reading it yourself. But I guessed what it might be, and the result proved that I was not mistaken. Now, wait a moment."

He was gone again in an instant, and, when he returned a moment later, Ten-Ichi was beside him; and Ten-Ichi looked very angry indeed.

"Introduce me to your assistant," said Larsen, with his most sunny smile. "Tell him that we are friends, Carter. Tell him that I want him to forgive me for my [illegible] joke upon him—that I earnestly apologize. Tell him that you are glad he is here. When you have done that, Carter, and when he has accepted my apologies and forgiven me, I will tell you something about him."

Ten-Ichi looked from one to the other in amazement; but his face relaxed into a smile while Nick was telling him all that had occurred; and at the end of it he turned toward the Norwegian and held out his hand.

"My chief's word is my law," he said. "His wishes are the laws of my religion. My service is yours since he commands it; but, there is my hand, and my friendship with it if you care to accept all three, Captain [illegible]."

Promptly, the big Norwegian seized Ten-Ichi in his [illegible] hands, lifted him from his feet as if he were a [illegible], hugged him after the manner of his countrymen, and then, as he put him down again, he said:

"[illegible]"

"[illegible]"

"What do you suppose [illegible] on the island?" [illegible] asked him: he was to be detained against his will for a [illegible]" he asked.

"[illegible]"

[illegible]

a ju-jutsu twist that sent me reeling against the bulkhead with a thud that dazed me, and if it had not been for my great strength—well! It was like a mouse tackling an elephant; but, all the same, I honestly believe that if the cabin where it occurred had been ten feet bigger, he would have downed me with that attack. Ten-Ichi, you're a wonder," he added, with unmixed admiration.

"And now we are three friends together!" he cried out gladly. "God be praised! I will show you riches that you never dreamed of which may be had for the trouble of taking. I will unfold mysteries stranger than you have ever read about from the most sensational pages; but, more than all—*more than all, Carter, I will accomplish with your help the object and aim to which I have devoted my life.*

"And, now, you shall hear about it."

CHAPTER VI.

THE PURPOSE OF A THOUSAND YEARS.

"My story is a very brief one," he continued, after he had lighted a cigar and directed his companions to do the same. "It reads something like a chapter from the "Arabian Nights Entertainments." It will sound unreal, impossible. But it is, nevertheless, true.

"But, before I begin it, let me set your mind at rest upon another point. I have already told you that I knew something about that mysterious letter before I was permitted to read it, but I should have said that I guessed about it. The man who wrote the letter, I never heard about or guessed about, at all; but the woman to whom he refers almost in the last paragraph, who was present in the other tower cage, I have heard about, guessed about, dreamed about, thought about. How, you shall hear.

"I am descended from an ancient king of Norway; one might almost say that he was a mythological king, for he reigned before the Norse history was written. In that time there was a war for the throne between two brothers who were twins, and he who lost that fight was my ancestor.

"We have been very poor, this family of mine, for centuries. There was no royalty in our lives if it was in our blood; but each son in that descent, when he came to the age of manhood, was told the history of his being and was sworn to certain oaths.

"What those oaths were, or are, need not concern us at present; but the legends said that there was to be a son born to that branch of the family in the year 1882 who would be in the likeness of his great ancestor, in mind [illegible] and person. [illegible] that [illegible]"

[illegible]

[illegible]

"It sounds like a romance. It is a romance if you will; but it is romance of truth.

"From father to son for almost eight hundred years this story has been repeated over and over again; each father has sworn his son to the oaths required. For eight hundred years the men of my race and family have looked forward into the dim vista of the future—to *me*.

"Now, to return, for I will not tire you with details.

"The legend relates that that ancestor of mine, eight hundred years more or less ago, crossed the seas with one Lief Erieksen after he had lost the fight with his brother; that they discovered a new world of which they had not dreamed before; a vast world; a beautiful world this world that is now called America. History tells us that so much of the legend is true, at least."

The detective nodded an assent.

"The legend relates that, once within the time of each generation that followed, a messenger returned to Norway from that far land; returned as the ambassador of the uncrowned king who had fled to the new world; and the first of these messengers was the son of that uncrowned king who had fled with his father—in the boats of Lief Erieksen."

"Go on," said Nick. "It is an interesting story, and it is logical."

"That son was called Lief Larsen when he returned. He was ten years old when he went away; he was forty when he trod the rocks of Norway again; and the legend says is that he brought back with him a wife of such dark beauty that the men of my race who looked upon her were benumbed into speechlessness. She must have been an Atlantean, Carter."

"Possibly. Continue."

That son and that dark woman of such transcendant beauty were my ancestors. The messengers who came with each succeeding generation were servants; they were messengers only. But they kept alive the spark of freedom; they kept alive the purpose of that dethroned king. It has been kept alive all those years. It lives—*lives in me.*

"Once in a generation a messenger came, until, when my own father was a lad, the last one appeared. There has been no messenger since then: no other will come."

"Then—"

"Then—you, Wade."

"Continue, Larsen."

"My father, who was a lad of ten years at the time, the messenger who came to my father's father, and from him to me:

"'A day shall be given you after the fall of the fifteen. Nothing has changed the future for those and for the king, who passed the Gate in the Mountains since 1882. Then shall come from the ocean "Lief." Thou knowest that thou art a descendant of one of the fifteen and for to thee the secret of the ages is known. Thou shalt know that thou art arisen in that land; teach him that when he arrives at his majority he must go to that land, and that there he will find awaiting him the future queen of his people, even as he will be their king.'"

He paused, and sipped the water again.

"It sounds like a play, doesn't it, Carter?" he asked, with a short laugh.

"It has the atmosphere. But go on, Larsen."

"The messenger then told my father that a strange and warlike people had sprung up about that hidden kingdom in South America; that convulsions of nature—earthquakes, doubtless—had changed the face of it, and that now only a remnant remained, surrounded by towering mountains. He told him that in the center of that valley was a castle; that in the castle lived the king, now shorn of his power, a prisoner among his own people, beset by the new race that had overpowered him. He proclaimed himself to be the last of the messengers; and he said:

"'A daughter of the kings as yet unborn must be the bride of thy son, Lief, if the destiny is to be fulfilled. She will be waiting there for his coming. She will be worshiped like a goddess, but she will be, nevertheless, a prisoner. Her garden will be a castle tower, surrounded by a gilded cage. When he is twenty-one he must undertake the journey. As for what remains for him to do after that, he will know when he has fulfilled his mission—when he has rescued the princess and made her his bride.'

"Then, Carter, the messenger placed a roll of parchment in my father's hands; and with these words:

"'To be opened by thy son, Lief, when he shall be twenty-one. It contains the map of his route; it contains the instructions he must follow.'

"Well, that ends all that part of the story. The rest is to come.

"When I became old enough to understand, my father instructed me in the history of the family as other sons had been instructed by other fathers before him. I was shown the roll of parchment which I was to open and study on my twenty-first birthday; and then it was put away again in a receptacle that my father had made for it beneath the rafters of the roof of our humble home.

"So much for that, save that I wish to say here that the material of that parchment, its color, weight, and texture, was the same as that of the strange letter you now have in your pocket, and that, when the bird fell upon the deck of my yacht with that roll fastened beneath its wing, I recognized it at once as the same. I knew then from whence the message came, but it was addressed to you, and I dared not open it."

"Why? I should have thought——"

"You would have thought it impossible for me to resist the temptation; but the training of eight hundred years of patience was in my blood. I had been taught to obey the commands of my ancestors. I could not know

that the message came from a man who had once lived in New York, who in some mysterious way was now an inhabitant of that strange country I sought. I could only suppose that it was sent out by my people; I only did know that it was addressed to you. I curbed my impatience and delivered it. Purpose is my watchword. I know no other course in life."

"Well?"

"To return to the parchment that was left with my father."

"Yes."

"When I was twenty, my father dropped dead from a stroke of apoplexy. In falling, he overturned a light that was burning near him. The house was destroyed, and with it the parchment. I sought, first of all, to save the body of my father from the fire. My mother had been in her grave many years."

"But the parchment!"

"I rescued only a small portion of it—but it contained nothing—nothing save the secret of my vast wealth. That I did find. It told me where to find a fortune so vast that I might ransom with it the nations of the earth."

"Most men would have thought that sufficient," said the detective dryly.

"What! A mere fortune in gold and jewels, as against the purpose of almost a thousand years?"

"Go on."

"I need not tell you of that fortune now. Some day I will show you the secrets of it. But I set out at once without waiting until I was twenty-one to find the promised land."

"And you found the gold, and the jewels—the riches."

"Yes. Then I built this vessel, after plans of my own. I shall know more of her ere long. I equipped her. I manned her with care and prudence, and there is not a man among those who serve me who would not do my bidding, no matter what the consequence.

"And since that time, Carter—while this vessel was building, and since—I have searched the mountains of South America from end to end, from side to side, from top to bottom, from summit to base, from ocean to ocean, and from isthmus to cape—with no result. I have cruised off the coast; I have ascended and descended rivers; I have flown in balloons, up! with no success.

"Then came the bird with its message. I carried it to you to read. The rest you know."

He moved to his seat swallowed what remained of the water in the glass, and, without another word, left the cabin abruptly; and Nick turned to Ten-Ichi, whose eyes were staring straight ahead of him, and whose whole attention was concentrated upon what he had heard.

"Well, Ten-Ichi, what do you think of it all?" asked the detective.

"I think it is remarkable."

"And—true."

"Yes."

"It has the sound of truth, and there are coincidences."

"Striking ones."

At that moment Lief Larsen reentered the cabin. He was followed by four men who carried between them a large cage, inside of which, upon a perch, was a large bird of the color of chocolate save that its head and its tail-feathers were white as snow; and a glance told the detective that it was some rare specimen of the eagle family.

"The messenger," said Larsen, as the men placed the cage upon the cabin-table.

"What?" exclaimed the detective, as the men withdrew from the cabin. "You have kept the bird which brought the message to your deck?"

"It is there. Moreover, we have become very good friends, although it will have nothing to do with others. Stand a little back if you will, please."

He opened the door of the cage, and, reaching inside with his arm, waited for the bird to step sedately upon it; then he drew it forth and began to talk to it in a low tone and in guttural Norwegian which the bird seemed to understand.

It turned its head to one side and glared upon him with its sharp eyes; then it roughed its feathers and uttered a scream which must have been intended to represent pleasure, but which suggested almost anything but that emotion.

"It is strange," said Larsen, as he returned it to the cage, "but the language I spoke to it just now, it seems to understand; and that language was the ancient Norse, now as much a dead language as the ancient Greek."

"The bird was not injured, then, when it alighted upon the deck of the yacht?" said Nick.

"It was tired—exhausted. God sent the bird to me, Carter. God will direct that the bird shall take me to her."

"You will use it as a guide!" said Nick, starting to his feet.

"Aye, aye. I will use it—*we* will use the eagle as a guide."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAVERN IN THE MOUNTAIN.

The day came which saw our adventurers in the port of Buenos Ayres; and it also saw them depart that same evening, steaming up the Paraguay River, for it had been agreed between them that this was to be their route for the present.

Many had been the discussions during the voyage, concerning the object of their mission, for Nick Carter had agreed with Larsen in his faith in the existence of the strange country they were seeking. It remained now only for them to discover it; and as they went up the

Paraguay River in the yacht as far as Corrientes, which is six hundred miles and more from Buenos Ayres.

The detective discovered that Larsen was familiar with every turn and twist of the great river, and knew its waters as well as if he were an established pilot through them.

At Corrientes the Parana River branches off to the eastward and extends, with its vast system of thoroughfares, far into the heart of Brazil; and thirty-five miles farther north, on the Paraguay, the Bermejo River runs into it; and this comparatively unknown river reaches down from the loftiest and most impassable section of the *Cordillera de los Andes.*

It was up this latter river, to its source, if need be, that the party determined to venture first, although the [illegible] and its tributaries had never been visited by [illegible].

"I have been up the Bermejos over four hundred miles twice already," he said to Nick, when they were studying the maps that were spread upon the table in the cabin. "There is an Indian village called Oran that is between four and five hundred miles up that river from the Paraguay, where I have stayed, and where I have made friends with the natives. For the beginning of our search in that quarter we will make Oran our strategic [illegible]."

"Tell me about the place," said Nick.

"There is little or nothing to say of the place itself," was the reply. "It is merely a group of huts situated at the base of a mountain that is so big and so high that I am convinced that it has never been measured; and, if it were, that it would prove to be one of the highest mountains of the world."

"Indeed!"

"It is one enormous mountain—or chain of enormous mountains, if you please—by itself, and it extends north and south from Oran, between two and three hundred miles in either direction. The Bermejos River, I have been told by the natives, has its source directly at the opposite side of those mountains, but it flows around the southern spur, which is more than two hundred miles to the south of Oran.

"The one side of this river where it flows along the base of the mountain a sheer, perpendicular wall rises thousands of feet in the air, as smooth and as shiny as glass. It is called [illegible]. On the other side of the river are [illegible] which [illegible] among the [illegible] is called the Land's Edge of the Heathens.

"Between the river [illegible] the side of the valley, which I have spoken [illegible] is [illegible], or [illegible] and valleys; and that is as far as I have ever been able to [illegible]. Now you will understand why."

"I understand no more than that on the [illegible] the [illegible] and [illegible] and [illegible] understand something of the resources of this remarkable man.

At Corrientes a berth was found for the yacht where she could lie in waiting for their return; and here the crew were busy for many days getting out steel sectional plates from the hold which they fitted together with a skill that showed it was not the first time they had done it; and the result was, after almost a week of labor that a beautiful little vessel, forty feet long, roomy, comfortable, and of shallow depth was made ready for them to proceed upon their voyage.

Then three men from the crew of the *Viking* were selected to accompany them, and with the little vessel fully provisioned and equipped and provided with every article which they could think of which might be useful on their trip, the *Lief* was put under way for the voyage.

We have nothing to do with the voyage up the Bermejos, although a quarto volume might easily be filled with a description of it.

At Oran, which is at the base of the huge mountain already described, they rested three days while they completed their preparations for the more hazardous part of the trip; for now they were to cut themselves loose entirely from the last semblance of civilization and were to penetrate into regions hitherto unknown to the white man.

In order that the reader will more readily understand the geography of the place where they next made a halt, try to imagine a huge mountain which towers many thousand feet into the air and which at its southern extremity comes to a point that is almost as sharp as the angle of a letter V; and this point is directed as straight south as the needle of the compass would be after crossing the equator.

And here the river they were following made its turn, sharply around the angle already described. It came from unknown regions to the northward, flowing in a southeasterly course, and here made an abrupt turn and started away again in a northwesterly direction along the route they had come.

The time was about the middle of the forenoon on Sunday when they reached this point; and here, in a safe place, the *Lief* was moored near the shore.

"Now, Carter," said the Norwegian, "I will show you the source of my great wealth. You will admit, after that, the authenticity of the chart I have followed; and you will be convinced, I think, that if one part of the information I follow is correct, the other parts must be the same."

"Certainly," said the detective.

Larsen was quiet for a moment; then he continued:

"I have told you that the part of the scroll I saved from the flames contained information which led me to the fortune. I will not now describe to you the immense difficulty I encountered in discovering the place even

after I had the necessary directions. I might explain, however, that I was ultimately led to this river, which was referred to at first by a name which did not appear on any map, but later which appeared under the name Bermejos, sometimes spelled with a B and sometimes with a V, which are almost the same in Spanish. The two letters are really interchangeable; but you already know that."

Nick nodded his head in the affirmative.

"My searches finally brought me here. I was poor then; but I had four men with me who were faithful. They were my navigator and the three remaining officers of the *Viking*.

"We came to this point. We anchored almost in the same spot where our anchor rests at this moment. We spent three months here, searching for the place which I shall show you in less than half an hour. Come."

The three, Nick Carter, the Norwegian, and Ten Ichi, embarked in a small boat, which had been brought with them on the deck of the *Lief*, and, after crossing the river to the opposite side, they rowed along the base of the mountain until they arrived very nearly to the point of rocks which formed the angle.

Here they came upon a cavernous opening in the face of the smooth cliff out of which the water of the river flowed with violence, forming an eddy which was almost a whirlpool as soon as it came into the open.

Larsen pointed toward the cavernous opening, which was in the form of an arch fifty feet wide at the surface of the river; and he said:

"We go through that hole, Carter."

Nick looked at the place, and shrugged his shoulders.

"It is an easy thing to say," he replied, "but it looks to me as if it would be impossible to force a boat, with oars, against that current, or even to pass the whirlpool."

"So it would be—now," replied the Norwegian. "Two years ago that hole was full of water, and it gushed from the opening like a jet from a charged siphon; in another half-hour it will be as still as a mill-pond and for a little while it will remain so. It is then that we will pass through."

"And then?" asked Nick.

"Then—I will show you the rest."

They waited for the waters to subside, and while they were waiting, the Norwegian added:

"It was a long time before I dared to go through that hole. I had only a part to do then. I did not know what was beyond, save for what the old parchment told me. Also a little now will be startled by a noise which will sound to your ears like the siren whistle of a dozen ferry-boats in New York harbor, and it will shriek around these mountains with the voice of a million fiends. The natives who have heard it—and it can be heard for many miles, although not as far away as you would suppose, believe that it is made by the spirit that haunts this region. It is needless to say that they shun this spot and that there is no inducement which will persuade one of them to come within three miles of where we now are."

"Go on," said the detective.

"I have a scientific explanation for the noise, which also explains the phenomenon of the rising and falling of the water which passes through this hole."

"Of course," said the detective.

"It is that somewhere farther up this river there is a hollow in the mountain which is shaped like a fountain ink-well; that the river flows into the cup of this well, and so it gradually fills what we will call the bulb, until the resistance of the compressed air inside the bulb becomes so great that it will not fill any fuller. This resistance would turn the current of the river back into its natural course, and the water which had been forced into the bulb in the manner I have described, would escape by any means it could find; that is to say, it would flow back out by the way it entered, and it would also seek any other opening that might be found.

"One of those openings is this hole, here—and I suppose there are others, also.

"Now, when the last jet of water is forced from the bulb where it has been compressed by the weight of the water of the river, the air, or the gases there, escape with a sudden rush which——"

"Which creates the noise you have described."

"Exactly."

"And that portion of the volume of the river itself which has been diverted from its natural course returns to it for a time, and this hole, where the water has been rapidly falling since we have been waiting here, becomes almost dry?"

"You have guessed it. The marvelous part of it all is that the phenomenon is repeated every six hours with the regularity of clock-work. Hark, now! In another moment you will——"

He had not completed the sentence when a noise like unto a thousand steam whistles that were sounded as one filled the air about them with a deafening sound which was as terrifying as it was wonderful.

It seemed to proceed from every side at once, and it continued for a full minute, after which it gradually died away to a low wail, until it was lost in the utter silence of the mountain fastnesses.

"I am almost sorry that I told you of the sound before you heard it," said Larsen, with a smile; and it was Ten-Ichi who replied to the remark.

"I am glad that you did tell us," he said. "I for one should have been almost as loth as the natives—I think I should have felt inclined to turn tail and run."

"Hardly that," said Larsen, laughing. "Now, look to me as if you were built exactly that way. But are you ready? Pull steadily, now, and strongly. I will

guide the boat. You have about fifteen minutes hard pull before you, through the darkness."

And then the little boat, with its three occupants, shot through the opening in the rocks and was lost in the blackness that was beyond.

And Ten-Ichi found himself wondering how a man had ever had the courage to search that terrible spot for the first time; for Ten-Ichi still had much of the superstitions of his people coursing in his blood.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALLEY OF GOLD.

But they had not proceeded far before Larson turned on a headlight that he had provided for the small boat, and the reflection of it showed the others that they were inside a lofty cavern, the walls of which reflected back upon them the rays of the light as if from millions of gems.

At last they stopped beside a platform of rock, and here Larson directed them to get out of the boat, and, leading the way, with the end of a long rope in his hand, they climbed up a series of steps that had been cut in the stone, until they had ascended to a height of fifty feet.

Here the Norwegian made the rope fast to a ring that was set in the rock, and, putting out the light he carried in his hand, he pointed ahead of them to where a glimmer of daylight could be seen.

"Our boat is made fast now," he said. "It will follow the rise and fall of the water and will be perfectly safe until we return. Follow me, now."

Following a winding course, they presently emerged from the cavern upon an open space; and here it was as if a giant shovel had scooped out an oblong section of the mountain from the top down; and on every side of it there were holes like caverns, or like the shafts of mines—which they really were; and before the entrance to each of the holes there were piles of metal, in the shape of bars, thrown together like stove-wood.

One of these piles was quite near, and Ten-Ichi uttered a cry of amazement.

"Gold!" he shouted.

"Yes," replied the Norwegian quietly. "It is gold; almost virgin gold, in fact. If you will search carefully under the openings of those mines, you will discover the remnants of the ancient smelters. But those piles you see are made of bars of pure gold, and in plain sight from where we are standing, along the three miles by two of the widest of this valley, there are thousands of tons of gold molded into bars as you see this pile here. There are thousands of tons of gold here, Carter, ready to be coined into money or used in the arts.

"It is wonderful," said Nick.

"Yes. Would you like to hear how I explain it, Carter?"

"I certainly would."

"I must hark you back to the Platonic authority for the existence of Atlantis. My idea is that at that time all South America was a colony of Atlantis, just as now Australia is a colony, or group of colonies, of Great Britain. I think that gold was then mined for other purposes than wealth and money. It was used for decorative purposes. It was too common to be of great value; but it was malleable, non-corrosive, and adapted for many uses.

"Here were located extensive mines of it—and here, when that great convulsion of the earth came upon the world, that convulsion which destroyed Atlantis until it disappeared in the sea and which brought into view as an offsetting balance the towering mountains which cover the face of the South American continent, this mining center was miraculously preserved.

"Doubtless, at that time, following upon the convulsion, there was no way out of this oblong valley that was left. It might have been filled, for centuries, with water which has gradually leeched away or evaporated. Doubtless many thousands of workers in these mines met with death in this valley. They were crushed by falling rocks, drowned by the inrush of mighty waters, or met death by starvation, unable to get out after the walls of mountains had been heaped around them; but they left behind them the fruits of their labors, which, thousands of years later, my ancestor was to discover.

"The continent of Atlantis was swallowed by the ocean; this continent, which had been almost a level plain before, became what it now is.

"But you know now what is the source of my wealth. When I want gold I come here to get it. Those ingots weigh fifty pounds each. A ton of gold is worth, approximately, fifty thousand dollars."

"But how in the world do you transport it in safety to the *Viking?*" asked Ten-Ichi.

The Norwegian laughed.

"Very easily," he said. "Outside, near where we left the *Lief*, I build rafts—I load my gold upon the rafts; I cover the gold with canvas. The current of the river floats the raft for me. The *Viking* can ascend the Bermejo almost three hundred miles. Come! Have you seen enough?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"While you and I and Ten-Ichi are searching through these mountains for the place we seek," said Larson, "the men we brought with us will be getting gold from here, and when we are ready to return, we will take about a million dollars' worth with us, for pocket-money."

He laughed; and then he added:

"You and Ten-Ichi are welcome to all the gold you

care to take away with you, now or at any time in the future, Carter. Come."

They returned in silence to the boat, embarked again, and so floated again out of the interior of the mountain before the water had risen enough to interfere with their progress.

But when they were again in the cabin of the *Lief*, Nick said to Larsen:

"And now, captain, what are your plans?"

"I will tell you, Carter;" and he raised his right hand and pointed toward the caged eagle that had been brought with them to the mountains. Then he added:

"While we were coming up the river I wrote a letter—or, rather, a message—on parchment as thin and as light as that which you received. I will read it to you."

He crossed to a small desk and produced the parchment, and he read:

"'If this should meet the eye of him who wrote to Nick Carter, know that Mr. Carter is among these mountains in search of the writer; that he has assitance; that he will keep up the search for months or years, if need be. The writer of the message to Nick Carter is requested to write more—and more—and more. To catch other birds and send out messages constantly, if that is possible, and to resort to every possible device for signaling, such as sending up columns of smoke, if that is possible. If a human messenger can be sent out, let him be sent to the southernmost point of the river Bermejo, where it turns around the spur of the mountain that screams, and let him wait there, months, if need be, to deliver his message. What do you think of that, Carter?"

"I think it is all right."

"There is another message, in the old Norse tongue, which I will send with it. It begins:

"'If a descendant of the ancient kings of Norseland should see this, know that Lief Larsen is in these mountains searching for the princess.' The rest of the message, Carter, is a copy of the other."

"Good."

"Then there are two more copies. One of these is in Spanish and the remaining one is in the language or dialect of the natives of this region. Thus, you see, there will be four messages."

"Yes."

"And now, if you approve, let us start the eagle on its journey. Stand back, if you please, both of you. The bird will permit me to handle him, but he would rather that your eyes, if you understand me, were."

He opened the door of the cage and took the bird from it, but then, with great care, he fastened the roll of parchment under its wing so he had secured fast to do it, and then, when all was in readiness, he led the way to the deck, with the bird perched upon his arm, while the others, Nick and Larsen followed him.

Outside, the day had advanced to afternoon, but the sun was still an hour or more high.

"Would it not be better to wait till morning?" asked Nick.

"No. I think not. Let us lose no time. If this bird is at home in this region, he will soon discover where he is. He may remain about here, near us, for some days, but ultimately he will get his bearings, and then he will disappear. He will return from whence he came. He will find again that very caged tower from whence he received the message, and he will go to it for food, just as he used to do. Look!"

He raised his arm in the air and then brought it down with a sudden jerk, and the bird, finding that nothing hampered its movements, uttered a loud cry of joy and spread its huge wings.

In another moment it was circling up and up toward the tops of the mountains, and the three men stood there and watched it until it grew smaller and smaller and finally became a mere speck over their heads; and then it disappeared from view over the top of the mountain toward the north.

And then Larsen turned to the detective.

"Carter," he said, "I resign now."

"Resign!" exclaimed Nick. "Resign what?"

"The command of this party. You are now the chief. I will obey orders as implicitly as each member of the crew of the *Viking* obeys me. From now on you are the chief."

"But——" began the detective; but Larsen interrupted him with a wave of his arm.

"I have been here before," he said. "I have searched around here before. I have met with no success. Now, instead of being a leader, I will follow. You are now the leader; Ten-Ichi and I will be your assistants."

Nick was thoughtful for a moment. Then he said:

"I am sorry that you did not suggest that idea three hours ago."

"You are! Why?" asked Larsen.

"Because I should have released the eagle inside the valley of gold."

"Eh? But why?"

"There is perhaps no good reason why. It has only occurred to me that he would possibly get a better start from there."

"I don't see why. Even now he has passed directly over that valley of gold, as you have named it."

"Tell me," said Nick, after another pause, "have you ever searched through any of the old mines? Through the shafts, I mean?"

"Through some of them—yes; but with no result."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing."

"How many shafts are there in that valley?"

"More than two hundred."

"And how many have you explored?"

"Ten, I think. Not more than that."

"I understand from your manner that you never had faith that you would discover the secret in that manner. Did you?"

"No."

"And yet, Larsen, where else can we search? Here we have impassable mountain walls on one side of us, and a country which we do not need to search on the other. To my way of thinking the only possible route from here, which affords the least hope of success, lies through that valley—through one of the mine-shafts of that valley."

"Possibly," said Larsen, with a shrug. "You are the leader. From now on I go only where you lead, Carter."

"In that case," said Nick quietly, "my orders are these: In the morning early we will pack as many provisions as we can carry. We will enter the valley again as soon as possible, and we will not leave it again until we have searched every shaft that is there—or, at least, until we have discovered a way out of it which is not the way we entered. Are any of these shafts vertical?"

"No. They are all what a miner calls 'drifts.' Some start upward, some downward."

"Good; then we will follow those drifts one after another, until we know where they lead. Or until one of them has led us to—shall I call it the 'Promised Land,'?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE INDEX OF THE SEVEN HOLES.

Dawn was just breaking in the morning when the three men awoke as with one impulse, for there was an excitement in the air which each of them felt, although they experienced it in different ways.

It happened that Nick Carter was the first one to reach the deck, and instantly he reentered the cabin.

"Larsen," he called, "your eagle is out there waiting for you."

"What!" exclaimed Larsen.

"It is true. The eagle has returned. He is waiting to be fed, I think. I wish you would catch him again."

"All right. To take into the valley with us?"

"Yes."

And so a few an hour later, the water was in a right condition for them to enter through the hole in the side of the mountain and so make their way to the valley of gold, the eagle made one of the party, still with the roll of parchment fastened under its wing.

For now the bird was impatient to be free again.

It had tasted once more the delights of liberty; it had soared again above the tops of the mountains, and it resented the confining bars of the cage.

"It will not return a second time," said Nick, when they came out upon the level plain of the valley of gold. "At least, not at once. Open the door of the cage, Larsen, and let it find its own way out. We will walk away and leave it so."

And so they turned their backs upon the king of birds; but they had not gone far before they heard it utter its scream directly over their heads, and, watching it, Nick saw it soar away toward the north again.

It has been said that the valley was oblong—an oblong square. Its direction was exactly north and south; and now the eagle sailed directly to the highest point of rocks at the northern end of the valley, where it alighted for a moment.

Then, with a second loud scream, it started away again and disappeared; nor did they see anything of it again for many weeks.

"It is rather certain," said the detective, "that our way lies toward the north. Twice the bird has departed in that direction. We will move our packs to the north end of the valley and begin the search there. How far is it, Larsen?"

"Three miles—a little more."

"It looks barely a mile."

"I know; but you will realize the distance before you have carried your pack across it."

"I have no doubt of that."

As they approached it, Nick studied the face of the almost smooth cliffs before them.

From side to side the valley covered an extent approximating two miles, and the face of the cliff had been punctured here and there by holes into which the ancient miners had delved in their search for gold.

Doubtless gold was less to them then, in value, than lead is to us now; that is, if its value could be calculated from the method they had employed in molding it into ingots and piling it haphazard on every side.

In that particular portion of the cliffs there were only seven of these holes, while the opposite ends of the valley and both sides, also, had been perforated much more frequently.

And as the party of three approached nearer to the cliff at the end of the valley, Nick discovered another peculiar thing about those holes; a significant one, he thought, too.

Turning to the Norwegian, he asked:

"You say that you searched through ten of the mine-shafts, or drifts, whatever you choose to call them?"

"Yes."

"Are any of those ten that you searched located in the cliffs we are approaching?"

"No; they are all at the opposite end. I thought at first that I would begin there and take a regular course around the valley, searching them all; but it didn't take me long to find out that if I pursued that course I would

spend the rest of my natural life in the effort. I abandoned it, after exploring ten of them."

"And they were all at the other end?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever studied the end we are approaching, with any particular care?"

"I cannot say that I have; that is, not with more care than I have devoted to the other three walls of the valley."

"Look at it now—carefully—and tell me what you see," said the detective quietly, at the same time stopping and putting down his pack in order to converse with greater freedom as well as to rest a few moments."

"I see a cliff about three thousand feet high, I should judge," was the reply, smiling.

"What else, Larsen?"

"A lot of holes are in the cliff; is that what you mean?"

"How many holes do you see?"

"Seven."

"Good. Now, do those seven holes suggest anything [illegible]?"

"[illegible]."

"What! And you a sailor?"

"Eh? By Jove, Carter! You are right!"

"What do you see now?" asked Nick, with [illegible].

"The seven stars of the Big Dipper, as sure as you're a living man."

"Correct, Larsen. Now, when we look into the [illegible] the Big [illegible]?"

"[illegible], Carter."

"[illegible] it is not visible—it is never visible in this latitude, [illegible]?"

"Never."

"And it is not to be presumed, is it, that the ancients who worked these mines many thousand years ago, knew [illegible] much about the northern heavens?"

"[illegible]."

"[illegible] and very little if anything about those [illegible] of the equator. Isn't that true?"

"It is."

"[illegible] you think, then, that those holes might be significant?"

"I will tell you what is significant. That is that I did right in appointing you chief of this expedition. I have been here many times before, but I never so much [illegible]."

"[illegible] this valley was as old, to all appearance, then, as it is now. And now arises the question: If all this gold that is piled around us was here, in view, when he came here, what possible reason could he have for mining more of it?"

"None, I should say."

"Exactly. And, in that case, he had another and a better reason than the search for gold, for making those holes; eh?"

"You are right. You are right."

"Do you notice another thing about the position of the seven holes, Larsen?"

"Look here, Carter, I'm taking lessons now; I'm not giving them. I sit humbly at your feet to learn. Tell me what you notice about them."

"The stars of the Big Dipper, as they are located in the heavens, point with the two outside stars of the bowl, directly—or nearly so—toward the North Star, do they not?"

"Yes. That is the first thing that a sailor learns."

The detective took a compass from his pocket and held it so that Larsen could see it.

"Now," he said, "if you will notice the position of the holes in that wall of rock, in relation to north, you will see that the two holes at the end of the bowl of the Dipper could not, in the way they are placed, point at the North Star, even if it were visible at night in this part of the world."

"That is true."

"And if you wished to look at the Southern Cross, you would have to turn around and stand with your back to that cliff."

"Yes."

"Well, doesn't it follow, as a bit of logic, that if the seven holes were made there by deliberate design, to represent the Great Bear, or Big Dipper of the heavens, the two indicative holes or stars were made to point toward *something?*"

"I think it does—decidedly. By the way, that constellation is sometimes called the Plough, in my country."

"I know. Have you ever visited this end of the valley at all?"

"I have never been nearer than we are now, to it."

"How high up should you judge those holes to be, from the floor of the valley?"

"The highest one, perhaps three hundred feet from the bottom; the lowest one—from here it does not look to be over fifty feet up."

"That is about what I make them to be. Now, what [illegible]?"

"[illegible]."

"[illegible]."

"[illegible]."

"[illegible]"

..., now? Those that you see elsewhere than at this ...lar end?"

"The highest isn't above thirty or forty feet."

"Exactly; and every one that is well up on the face of ... rock is easily approached from the floor of the valley by foot, is it not?"

"Yes."

"While these that are ahead of us are situated upon a sheer side of the cliff, and there is no apparent way to ...ch any one of them."

"...s so. I had not thought of that, either."

"What do you make of it now that your attention has been called to it."

"I don't know. I give it up. You are conducting this ...mposium."

"Haven't you noticed also that there are no piles of ...ingots at the north end of the valley?"

"I notice it now."

"Neither are there piles of gold at either side, near the north end. That goes to indicate that the gold-bearing ...ion about here did not extend to the north. For half a mile from the north end of the valley, on either side of it, there are no mine-shafts in the cliffs. Have you ...ced that?"

"...es."

"It all indicates that there is no gold at this end of the valley; or, at least, not sufficient, according to their ... to pay for the mining of it."

"...ell?"

"...n't that make you ask yourself *why* the holes ... made in the northern wall of the valley?"

"..."

"...

"...ll reply to it for me."

"Larsen, they were put there to point out to you the ...y you should travel after you arrived this far on your ...rney; and if you had saved *all* of the parchment from ... fire that burned your father's house, that fact would ... been made plain to you."

CHAPTER X.

THE WAY THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN.

The Norwegian looked at Nick Carter with an expression of mingled wonder and admiration in his eyes. Then, with great emphasis, he said slowly:

"I believe that you are right, Carter. In that bit of ...ment that I saved from the fire I found only a de... the valley we are now in, and of the gold it ... That part which would have shown the way ... ...ing, and I now believe, as you say, ... after all, it is but the gateway to the other [illegible] ... and [illegible] ... certainly toward the ... in the rock, and then is narrowed;

"Beyond there, somewhere, lies the land I seek. What it is I do not know, but I swear that I will never leave here again until it is found, even if I have to remain here alone in my search, and even if I have to die here, without discovering it at all."

He turned, then, and extended his hand.

"Thank you, Carter," he said, with feeling. "You are my best friend. I knew that I had discovered one when I called upon you at your home and took the letter to you. Shall we go on, now?"

"...s."

"How are we to reach those holes? That is the question."

"I think," replied Nick, "that if there is a way through them or through one of them, that there will also be a way *to* them."

"Without doubt."

"This place is not a resort for visitors. It would hardly be necessary to conceal a way through that cliff, from a chance wanderer who might enter this valley. The lure of the gold he would have found ready at hand would have been bar enough to keep him from attempting to go farther."

"That it would."

They picked up their packs again and hurried onward toward the wall of rocks, now enthused by the result of their reasoning; and when at last they deposited their burdens at the base of the cliffs and looked at the time, they found that it was not yet noon.

"A hearty meal before we go a step farther," said the detective; "and while I prepare it, you two may go in search of water."

Shortly after one o'clock they started forward again, Nick leading them directly toward the lowest of the seven holes; and here, not very greatly to their surprise, they found that a series of steps had been cut into the rocks while each one of them was fashioned so that it also afforded a firm hold for the fingers.

By seizing upon the one that was a short distance higher than the head, the body might be drawn up so that the feet could be placed in the first step; then, by pulling the body up again, another step was gained; and so on, to the top.

And here the detective held back and pointed toward the steps in the rocks.

"Will you go first, Larsen?" he asked.

"No; you are the leader here."

"Nevertheless, you are the expected heir."

"All the same, you shall lead the party. But for you I should have continued my foolish search at the opposite end of the valley, if I searched here at all. You have shown me the way, and you must lead."

"So be it," said Nick; and he began the ascent.

To climb fifty feet or more into the air along the face of a cliff, like beetles outward somewhat as that one

did, and with no more to cling to than they had, is no mean task; but these were not men who were easily daunted, and they did not hesitate.

When Nick climbed out upon the platform of the "hole in the wall" he turned, and one by one helped his friends up beside him; and then they found themselves standing at the entrance of what looked like a cavern save that there were evidences on every side that the hand of man had made it.

Before them yawned a black hole; and now the detective brought into use a bundle of withes that he had carried with him up the face of the rock, and which he had strapped to his back without explaining to what use he intended to put them.

Now he did explain.

"It is my idea," he said, "that each of the seven holes means something. At least, even if they did not, I would like to mark each one of the seven that we reach—so."

He tore a strip of white cloth from a piece he had brought with him and tied it to the end of one of the withes, and this he fastened into the rock so that it projected out over the cliff.

"There," he said. "If we come out again at one of the other holes, we will see that bit of cloth, and we will know the location of the first hole we visited; and so on. Come."

He lighted a lantern that had also been strapped to his back—each of them was provided with one—and led the way into the hole.

For a short distance the way was perfectly level; but then it began to ascend a steep angle, and, after a climb of only a few moments they saw daylight ahead of them.

"Here is the second hole," said the detective; and he was right, for a moment later they came to the opening and looked down again upon the valley; and below them, to the left, they could see the white streamer that Nick had fastened there.

This hole they found, was like the muzzle of a double-barrel shot-gun, for it had two entrances, or, rather, there were two holes, side by side.

They had issued from the one to the east; now they entered at the one to the west; and again ascended and traveled a considerable distance.

The first experience was repeated, only that the distance they went and the steep they climbed were each greater than the first time; and now, when the detective looked out over the plain of the valley, he not only discovered that they were directly above the first hole—the one at which they had entered the rock, but he also figured that they were at least two hundred feet above the ground, and that, therefore, they must be at the highest one of the seven holes.

Again there were two entrances, only this time they branched sharply away from each other.

Pausing only to rest a moment, they went on again; and now their way became difficult.

In places the passage was like a well-hole, and they were obliged to climb up these by the same means that had been employed in scaling the face of the rock outside. In other places there were level reaches along which they traveled with ease.

And thus, climbing and walking, they proceeded for three hours without once coming to the light of day; and, indeed, as Nick Carter calculated, traveling all the time away from the valley and directly into the depths of the mountain itself.

At last, upon one of the level places, they stopped to rest, for here a spring of pure water flowed past the gallery through the rocks and disappeared again into a fissure.

But after an hour they started on again.

For three more hours they continued to climb, alternately passing along almost level reaches, and again ascending through the well-like places that were extremely difficult; and at the end of that time they came upon another resting place where a spring gushed out from the solid rock, apparently, and flowed away again through a crevice.

"It is past seven o'clock in the evening, now," said the detective, looking at his watch, and winding it with care—the others following his example—"and the question is, Shall we take some sleep now, and proceed after we awaken, or shall we continue the search after a short rest."

"We are under your orders," said Larsen. "Of course you know my impatience; but you are in command. What are the orders?"

"My orders are that we eat some supper—fortunately we have considerable food with us, although I wish we had brought more from the packs—that we eat some supper, rather sparingly, for we don't know just when we can renew the supply. After that we will lie down to sleep."

"For how long, Carter?"

"Until we awaken naturally. Let the first and second one who arouse wait quietly until the others are awake. How is that?"

"All right. Here goes."

And so, after a very little time, each of the three was sleeping quietly, for the fatigues of the day had been sufficient to render them all subjects for sound slumber.

It was Nick Carter who opened his eyes first; but he had not raised himself to an upright position before he heard a stir beside him, and knew that Larsen had roused himself; and then Ten-Ichi also started wide awake.

Nick struck a match and lighted his lantern, and after

had eaten sparingly of their food and provided themselves with water from the spring, they started on again.

All that day they proceeded in the same manner, following the turns and windings of the cavernous gallery, stopping twice during their march and climb to eat a few mouthfuls, and then taking up the journey again; but never once approaching any nearer, seemingly, to the end of their journey.

"It is strange," said Nick, during one of these pauses, but the air always seems good in this place. I have noticed several times what seemed to be a draft of it, as if we were approaching an opening; but each time I have found that I was deceived."

"It proves one thing," said Ten-Ichi. "It proves that there is an opening somewhere in front of us."

"Sure," agreed Larsen. "I have never doubted that."

"There is another thing, which is not quite so pleasant, that we have proof of," said the detective, after a short pause.

"What is that?" asked Larsen.

"It is that we have either got to turn back and give up the search, or turn back in order to make a new start, and bring more food with us, or else we must go on about one-quarter rations. We will decide on that question. What do you say, Ten-Ichi, old chap?"

"We can get back, if we have to return, in less than one-third of the time it has taken us to advance, can't we?" he asked, in reply.

"Yes."

"Then I vote that you figure out just how long the rations will carry us, and that we go ahead on them as far as we dare to before we do turn back."

"I vote the same," said Larsen.

"I think it is good judgment," said the detective. "I think we can live two more days on the food we have. We can certainly keep going for a day or two at least, on short food, if we are obliged to do so. Come on. I will give the order when it is time to about face."

All that day they traveled onward through the same monotonous gloom that had been their lot, and again they lay down on the floor of the cavern, just as they did the night before.

They had made a whole day; and with the close of it, the last of a very little, of their supply of food.

Even then, that night, they stretched out upon the floor to rest, they were gaunt and haggard and weak, and Nick, very quietly, gave this order:

"When we awaken, we will start upon the return to Denver. We will move quickly, but we must make a short rest and have a good supply of provisions."

They ate no food at all, and in almost less than a minute they were lying side by side, and because of their exhaustion, were sound asleep.

And it was the detective who awakened first; and as he did so he started up and then rubbed his eyes in astonishment.

And well he might.

Less than two hundred feet away from him he could see a large round hole, somewhat lower than the level at which he had been lying, but through that hole, shining like a huge eye upon him, was daylight.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HIDDEN CITY.

As Nick Carter leaped to his feet and rushed to the exit from the cavern through which they had been struggling so long a time, the others of his party awakened and hurried after him, and in a moment more they were standing side by side upon a platform of rock overlooking a valley which appeared to their eyes, hungry for the sight of something, as if it were indeed the promised land.

It was a strangely peaceful scene, too, upon which they gazed; a strangely silent scene, the detective thought, as he looked again, rubbing his eyes to make sure that he was not deceived.

The buildings he could see were not more than a mile distant from where he was standing, and the sun had just appeared above the mountain tops to the eastward, glorifying the surrounding country with its light.

And the brilliant rays of the sun gleamed upon strangely beautiful buildings which glistened and sparkled as if they were set with gems.

Every large building—it should be said here that Nick counted the buildings as he looked upon them, and that there were twenty-six in all; no more—each one of the larger edifices had been ornamented with at least one dome; many of them had two; and the domes surmounted towers which stood at their corners, as if it were a particular style of architecture which the builders of them had sought to follow.

And the domes glistened yellow as gold in the rays of the sun as if they were indeed fashioned from that solid metal.

But the strangeness of it all! And the silence of it all!

It was these two things which impressed the detective, and his companions, as well, and which made them rub their eyes and look a second time to make sure that there was no mistake.

Not a sound came up to them from the small city, which should have been astir at this hour of the morning; not a sign of motion or of life in any form could be seen anywhere.

There were no people moving about among the houses. There were no cattle grazing in the fields.

Each one of the three men who looked upon the scene were impressed with the same idea of abandonment—or of death; and Larsen turned to the detecetive with a wan smile on his face.

"It would seem, Carter," he said, "that we have arrived too late."

The detective nodded his head.

As if with one accord, they waited where they stood, looking, waiting, and watching.

Ordinarily—that is, if they had detected the presence of human beings in this strange and hidden city—they would have rushed forward without hesitation, toward it; but now they forgot their hunger and their hardships of the past few days, in their dismay at the discovery they had made.

And there was a long silence between them, too; for not one of them had an idea to advance to the others respecting the strange condition that confronted them.

Then, suddenly, with marked vehemence, the Norwegian seized the arm of the detective, while with his disengaged hand he pointed toward the tallest and largest of the buildings that were before them in the valley.

But there was no need to point; all had discovered the same thing at the same instant.

A solitary figure had come out upon the flat roof of the building toward which he was pointing.

It was the figure of a man, and in an instant the detective had unslung his field-glasses from his shoulders and brought them to his eyes, while the others waited with impatience for an opportunity to use them.

After a moment Nick dropped the glasses from his eyes and passed them in silence to the Norwegian, who, in turn, after looking through them, passed them on to Ten-Ichi.

The figure they saw was that of a man—a white man, too.

A long, figured robe, studded with jewels and richly embroidered, fell from his shoulders and was belted at the waist. And, although he was a comparatively young man, a long beard depended from his chin; and his beard and hair were of the same golden color as the covering of the golden dome near where he stood.

But there was another thing about the individual which attracted them.

It was that he carried, perched upon one arm, that very eagle which only a few days before they had despatched with a message tied under its wing.

At least, it looked to be the very bird, through the glasses.

And then, as they looked, the bird spread its wings and leaped from its perch upon the arm of the man, and soared away into the air, uttering its familiar scream as it did so, which came to them only faintly from the distance.

And then, as if by mutual consent, they watched the bird.

They saw it soar into the air, and there it circled several times—and then suddenly, as if it had discovered them where they were standing upon the platform of rock on the side of the mountain, it screamed again, and darted downward, as if it were diving for its prey, and in another moment it had alighted upon a point of rock not fifty feet away from them; and they could see plainly that it bore another message fastened beneath its wing.

But it would approach no nearer to them, although it acted as if it recognized the Norwegian; but after remaining a moment where it had alighted, it uttered another scream and leaped away into the air again and made directly toward the roof where the strange man was standing, where it straightway alighted again upon his outstretched arm.

And they discovered then that the man had seen them.

He dislodged the bird from his arm, and then he rushed to the edge of the roof, where he stood making frantic gestures toward them.

And now they did not hesitate.

With one accord they started down the mountain side, running as best they could, and sometimes stumbling in their eagerness.

But it was not a difficult descent they had undertaken, and in a short time they were among the silent houses, rushing toward that one—the only one—where they had discovered any sign of life in that uncanny place.

There were no apparent streets in the strange city. The houses seemed to have been erected merely with an idea of individualism; and as they approached the house where the man was still making gestures toward them from the roof, he continued to wave his arms as if he were overcome with the excitement of his discovery that others were near him at last.

Around the houses there was no sign of life in any form.

Everything that had once lived there seemed to have died or had deserted the place, and the man on the roof was apparently the only living thing that was left to welcome them after their long and hazardous journey.

As they came nearer, he rushed to the edge of the roof and looked over upon them; and at last they heard him calling out to them.

His first cry was in English; then he seemed to repeat it in Norwegian, and then again in Spanish; and at last they came to a halt beneath where he stood, and replied to him.

"God bless you!" he shouted over and over again.

Nick ran to the great front entrance to the house—the only entrance, in fact, for the architecture was Moorish in its design, and the one entrance evidently led to a court from which other doors would lead to different parts of the building.

But it was locked—evidently bolted and barred against them.

Just one word regarding the building itself.

It was as long, or nearly so, as a city block, two stories in height, and at each front corner of it there was a tower, each of which was in turn surmounted by a gilded cage.

Nick Carter discovered, after the first attempt, that he could not hope to batter down the huge door which barred their progress to the interior of the building; but he had brought with him that implement of use which nothing can replace at times—a lariat.

And now he uncoiled it, and, calling to the man upon the roof to catch the loop, he stood back a few paces from the building and threw it to him.

"Make the end fast to the bars of the cage," he called out; and in a moment he received a reply that it was done.

Then, turning to his companions, he said:

"I will go first."

It was nothing for him, with his great strength, to swarm that rope, hand over hand, to the roof of the building; and the instant he arrived at the top, the man who was there leaned over the parapet and seized him; and then he was pulled over the edge of the roof upon it.

"Jack Nielsen!" he exclaimed, the instant he rose to his feet and looked into the eyes of the man in the robe.

"Nick Carter!" cried out the other, in the same instant.

"I thought you were dead—and buried," said Nick.

"I have been," replied Nielsen. "Dead to the world—and buried here. How long I do not know."

"Where are all the people who live in this strange city?" asked the detective.

Nielsen smiled sadly, put out his hands with the palms outward, shrugged his shoulders, and replied:

"Once in each three years," he said, "the city is deserted as you see it now. The people who live here go to the Mountain of the Sun, and they remain away from this place three weeks and three days."

"The Mountain of the Sun?" answered the detective inquiringly.

"Don't ask me where it is or what it is, for I do not know. I only do know that they go there to worship; that it is a part of their religion; that it is a sort of pilgrimage, like that to Mecca by the followers of Mahomet. They have been gone a week. They will be absent two weeks longer."

"And how many are there of them?" asked Nick; and as he asked the question, Larsen and Ten-Ichi joined them upon the roof.

"Two hundred—no more. I do not know exactly," was the reply; and when Nick would have proceeded with other questions, Larsen interrupted.

"Where is the princess?" he demanded, as if he had been there but yesterday and knew precisely whereof he spoke.

The reply was as astonishing as the question itself, for it came from behind them, and they wheeled in their tracks, to discover, approaching them as lovely a vision of beauty as the world has ever seen.

Arrayed in a robe, or gown, of Grecian pattern and cut, white and covered with embroidery of gold, with golden hair flowing through hoops that were studded with priceless gems, the young girl looked as if she might have been a spirit suddenly descended among them.

"Here!" she said, in a low, sweet voice; and she stopped where she was and reached out both hands toward the man who had spoken; toward the tall Norwegian, whose fathers and forefathers had planned almost a thousand years for this meeting.

Larsen took three steps toward her, and, stretching out his own hands, took hers into them.

"Hilda?" he said, in the old Norse tongue.

She nodded brightly, and smiled; and in the same tongue she replied:

"Is it Larsen?"

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Larsen.

Then he turned to Nick Carter.

"Is not the prophecy fulfilled?" he cried out. "See! Over a lapse of hundreds of years, and past all obstacles, we know each other by name. What do you think now, Carter, of the plan of that ancestor of mine who should have been king, but who was driven from his home and country? What do you think, now, of the legends? Tell me that."

"I think," replied Nick quietly, "that the ways of the Almighty are incomprehensible."

Then he turned toward Nielsen again, leaving Larsen and Hilda to converse together, while Ten-Ichi stepped to his side.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PRINCESS HILDA.

"How comes it," asked Larsen, a few moments later, addressing Nick, "that you also have recognized one of the people here by name?"

"Have you forgotten," replied Nick, "the words of the letter you brought to me at my home in New York? "Don't you remember that the writer of that letter said in it that possibly I might remember him? That he used to live near me? And that he disappeared very strangely?"

"Yes."

"And that try as I could, I could not recall such a person?"

"Yes."

"It is now more than six years since Jack Nielsen, a Norwegian, like yourself, wandered away from his home. He was never heard from again, until almost a year later a dead body, or what remained of one, was discovered, and by the clothing and other things it was decided that it was Nielsen's body. And it was buried as such. I was away at the time, but one of my assistants took the case and tried to find him. He was never found—but now, here he is."

He turned to Nielsen and said:

"Tell us what you know about the rest of the story."

"I know nothing about it. How I came here I do not know. I never shall know, doubtless; and now that you have come, I do not care. I was seated in the library of my home one evening when a stranger, dark and cruel as hell appear me. I shrieked, but as the stranger said [illegible] I was in the place I remember nothing whatever of what occurred to me.

"For years after I came here I was little better than an imbecile. For much of the time I was kept in a condition of coma, but at about the time I wrote the letter to you which you providentially received I decided to play the part I had been forced to fulfill. I made myself appear stupid when I was not so, and gradually I recovered my wits."

"And what did you find out then?" asked Nick.

"I discovered that being a Norwegian, I was for some reason a sort of sacred personage to my jailors. That was why I had been drugged and stolen from my home. I have been told here that my name is Larsen, and that I have descended from the kings of Norway—which I knew to be untrue. And then I was told a tale about an ancient prophecy, which had to be fulfilled, and which had been brought here to carry out to the end in order that this community might never be broken up.

"The tale was that one day there would come a man to this place who would claim their Princess Hilda for his bride, and that he would carry her away to Norway with him; that thereupon all who lived here would die; that their only salvation consisted in keeping her here until the time for the fulfilment of the prophecy had passed.

"When that time had passed—and it is due on the day of the return of the pilgrimage from the Mountain of the Gods—I was to be proclaimed their prince. I was to take the princess for my wife, and—well, you can imagine the rest. We would be condemned to live in this God-forsaken paradise for the rest of our lives.

"Hilda, here, knows no other life than this; but I—I have a wife and children in little old New York, who, although they doubtless believe me to be dead, will yet, I am sure, welcome my return with open arms."

"That they will, I am sure," said Nick. "But [illegible] about the strange conditions which surrounded you when you described in the letter?"

"Those were the result of the efforts they made to convince me against my will that I was really the descendant of the kings of old. I was drugged and I was mesmerized, too, I have no doubt—until I had the strength and the courage to overcome the power that beset me and to regain at least a part of my individuality."

"I see. And Hilda?"

"Has [illegible] these days ago, but knew no reason [illegible]

mystery to me as she is to you. I was aware only that she existed, and that she was confined in a towered cage not unlike my own, at the opposite extremity of the building. I used to see her there. I saw her for the one and first time to realize her existence at the time I was writing that letter to you. But since that we have made signals to each other constantly; and when, a week ago, our jailors departed for the Mountain of the Sun, I went about a long planned effort to liberate myself from the cage when that pilgrimage should depart from here again.

"How I did it, you can guess. After that I struggled to set Hilda free. Only yesterday we decided that today we would manufacture a rope and let ourselves down from the roof and try to make our way across the mountains to liberty.

"You see, the eagle had brought your message. We knew that we had friends near at hand, and we thought that if we could get out upon the mountains we could make fires and send up columns of smoke to attract you to us; and in the hope that the bird might return to you, I had just equipped him with a reply when you appeared."

The detective turned to Hilda.

"Tell us of yourself," he said gently.

With a bright smile, she replied:

"There is so little to tell, Mr. Carter. I have never, within my recollection, set my feet outside the walls of this palace, as it is called. I have been taught from infancy that one day a prince would come to me from a distant land, to take me away with him, but that I must endure to leave this, the land of my fathers. They said his name would be Lief Larsen."

She laughed in a low key, and then continued:

"Until the day before they went away on the pilgrimage. I was told that the prince had arrived, but that he was ill. That when they returned he would be presented to me in due form. And I guessed that they referred to the man I had seen in the other caged tower; but all the time there was something in my conscience which told me that he was not the Lief Larsen of whom my father had taught me when I was a little child; for my father and mother are both dead.

"And then they went on their pilgrimage; and soon my friend here released me from my prison, and since that time three days ago we have planned together, for our escape from this place. He has told me about the world from which he has lived, which all seems so very strange to me who have seen nothing save what is visible from yonder gilded cage;" and she pointed toward the top of the tower which had once been her prison.

"We speak in only two languages here," said Nielsen. "The Norse, that we are using now, and a very bad Spanish, intermixed with words you have never heard."

"And food?" said Nick. "How have you lived since the pilgrimage left here?"

"We had every comfort left around us. Neither of us would have suffered—could have suffered in that way for months to come, Mr. Carter."

"And now," said Nick, "what do you advise? Shall we all await here, the return of the remarkable people who live here, or shall we——"

But both Hilda and Nielsen sprang forward as with one impulse.

"No, no!" she cried.

"By no means!" exclaimed Nielsen. "If you remain here, they will not hesitate to put you all to death, and then we may never hope for liberty. Let us go at once; without an hour of delay. You will know the way out, as you came here, won't you?"

"Certainly."

"Then we beseech you to take us away without delay."

Nick turned to Larsen.

"I resign the command of this expedition to you for the moment," he said. "What is *your* wish, Lief Larsen?"

"Let us go—let us go at once," was the reply. "So says the legend."

"Let it be so, then. We will start as soon as we have eaten and have provided ourselves with provision for the return trip."

"*Bud*," said Larsen, taking a step nearer to the detective, "*let us return again*."

"Ah! Now you are talking."

"Let us see these two people—my bride that is to be"—and he turned his eyes upon Hilda for an instant—"and this gentleman who was once known to you—let us see them back again to my heart, the *Lief*. We will then descend the river. We will return to the *Viking*. We will bring her as far up the Bermejos River as her draft will allow her to come, and then, Carter, you and I and Tau Ichi, with a few of my men, will return to this valley and make the acquaintance of the strange people who live here, who, after all, must be my countrymen. What say you to that plan?"

"I say *good!* We will do it, Larsen."

"Hilda may remain in safety aboard the *Viking*, Nielsen may remain there also, or he may return with us, as he prefers."

"If it is all the same to you," said Nielsen, with a shrug, "I will stay where I may never see this place again, and I will take the first opportunity of returning to little old New York. Gotham for mine, if anybody should inquire courteously, thank you, all the same."

"Then," said the detective, "let us make our preparations and start at once. We ought to be able to make the trip back through the cavern in a little more than a day."

"I think so," said Larsen.

* * * * * * *

It was not yet sundown when the five strangely assorted persons stood on the platform of rock in front of the entrance to the "way through the mountain," with the eagle crying out to them from a near-by rock, looked their last upon the strangely hidden city which they had come so far to find and which they were now leaving for only a short time.

"We will return," said Nick, looking backward.

"Within a month," said Larsen solemnly.

"And, possibly," said Ten-Ichi, with a smile, "I, too, may find a beautiful princess awaiting me when we come again."

And then they laughed aloud—and they disappeared, one by one, into the side of the mountain.

THE END.

The next number—530—of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY will tell of the strange adventures encountered by Nick Carter and his friends upon their return to the strange city of the Cordilleras. It will be entitled "An Amazonian Queen; or, Nick Carter Becomes a Gladiator."

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

TIP TOP WEEKLY

We receive numbers of Tip Top Weekly from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of the [illegible] Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 500 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We are so glad to send a fine [illegible] catalogue of the Medal Library, which [illegible] other good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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